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Aspiring to be a Leader of Moderation: A Study on Jordan's Islamic Policy

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Introduction

In 2001, after 9.11, the problem of Islamophobia entered the world stage, and following the Iraq War in 2003, the problem of “sectarian conflicts” also came to the fore. In 21st century, these inter-religious or inter-sectarian conflicts have attracted much negative attention, but it must be pointed out that there are also positive initiatives and movements toward rapprochement, dialogue and cooperation. This article deals with the Islamic policy of Jordan in the 21st century. During the 21st century, and especially after Iraq War, Jordan, known officially as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, has taken a unique and positive stance on its Islamic policy which aims at religious rapprochement. Formerly, religious rapprochement movements were advanced by Ulama or intellectuals in the Islamic World, but in the monarchy of Jordan, the king and the royal family are taking the initiative and this means it has political force. This article shows the religious rapprochement movement led by Jordan's royal family as “religious political strategy.” However Jordan's religious rapprochement movement has importance not only as political strategy but also as an illustration of Sunni Moderate thought. Jordan is demonstrating its leadership in religious rapprochement in the Islamic World, despite its relatively small size as a country. The following article begins by showing the conflicts as the background, and next, shows Jordan's moderate initiatives for rapprochement, first in response to inter-sectarian conflicts and next, inter-religious ones.

I. Jordan in the Contemporary Map of Islamic Trend

1-1. Jordan and the Rise of Sectarian Conflicts

After the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Khomeini insisted “export of revolution,” in terms of ideology, Shiite Revolutionism became a big threat for Sunni conservative countries including Jordan. At the time of the Iran-Iraq War, the perspective that a conflict would arise between Sunnis and Shias became commonly accepted, and the view that Iran would be a threat began to spread. This way of thinking is represented in the words “Shiite Crescent,” which was formally used for the first time by Jordanian King Abdullah II [Amos 2010: 118]. In an interview with *the Washington Post* he said: ‘If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new “crescent” of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects [...]’ [Wright and Baker: 2004]. This interview was given just before the very first election in Iraq after the Iraq War. As a result of this election,

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Shiites won a majority in the assembly of Iraq and the first “Shiite Arab State” came into being [Nasr 2007: 185–210]. Some researchers noted their doubts about the concept of “Shiite Crescent” [Terhalle 2007: 69–83] but there is some reality to the threat for Sunni countries, because of Iran’s active foreign policy such as its dispatching of the “Islamic Revolutionary Guards.”

After the Iraq War, especially after the bombing in Samarra, the violence of the sectarian conflicts escalated and started attracting attention. However it is important to understand that, in terms of ideology, the structure of these so-called sectarian conflicts not only pits Sunni against Shia but also Sunni Salafi Jihadism against Sunni Conservatism. Sunni Salafi Jihadism is also a big threat for Jordan. In other words, now Jordan is in the position of being attacked by both Shiite Revolutionism and Sunni Salafi Jihadism. In fact, Jordan is a place which has “produced” some important Salafi Jihadists. One prominent example is Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi (1966–2006), who is the Jordanian leader of the Iraqi branch of al-Qa‘ida and precursor to the Islamic State (IS) [Brisard and Martinez 2005]. Similarly, the two most important radical Ulama alive today, Abu Qatada al-Filastini (b. 1960) and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959), are both Jordanian citizens. Jordan was also home to Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–1999), for the last two decades of his life [Wagemakers 2016]. Moreover, Abd Allah ‘Azzam (1941–1989), some of whose ideas about jihad are held by current jihadist groups like al-Qa‘ida, was born in Palestine under Jordanian occupation and migrated to Jordan when his hometown was occupied by Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967 [Hassan 2014]. This put the Jordanian government under pressure to face their Salafi Jihadi ideologies and also their concrete violent jihad activities.

In the 1970s Salafism inside Jordan intensified, and after the 1990s Salafist activity in Jordan became violent, influenced by the return of participants in the Afghan War, the US army’s invasion of Holy Places in the Gulf War in 1991 and the conclusion of the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel in 1994 [Mickolus 1997: 554; Wiktorowicz 2001: 121]. One of the important characteristics of these Salafi Jihadists’ ideologies was using takfir against the Jordanian government and its supporters. In the 21st century, al-Zarqawi and then IS became a big threat for Jordan. On November 9th, 2005, suicide bombings occurred at 3 hotels in Amman and a fourth would-be suicide bomber, Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi, was arrested. These attacks killed 60 people and injured 115 others, for which al-Zarqawi later claimed responsibility [Wagemakers 2016: 146]. In September 2014, Jordan declared war on IS and sent its air force against it, and in retaliation for the capture and killing of the Jordanian air force pilot, Muadh al-Kasasbeh by IS, Jordan executed al-Rishawi and escalated its air campaign against IS [Wagemakers 2016: 146].

As we can see from the above, demonstrating its Sunni conservative ideology, Jordan has had to face Shiite Revolutionism and also Sunni Salafi Jihadism. Especially because of

the rise of Salafi Jihadism and its ideology of takfir against the Jordanian government, the need to reconstruct and to perform Jordan's Sunni moderate ideology has arisen.

1-2. Jordan and the Rise of the Religious Conflicts

The 1960s to 1970s was the era of the Islamic Revival. From the late 1970s, other religions also entered an era of revival, and the phase of political-ideologification of the religions began. As Kepel described, religious conflicts arising from the basic components of religion, regarding the differences between religious values or religious identities, have become bandied as a problem in Modern times [Kepel 1991]. From these conflicts emerged the problem of Islamophobia, which gradually spread, triggered by "the significant influx of Muslims into the West in the late 20th century, the Iranian revolution, hijackings, hostage-taking and acts of terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s, attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe." [Esposito and Kalin 2011; xxii]

Corresponding to this problem, the movement of inter-faith dialogue was raised by both the West and the Islamic world, especially after 9/11. From the Islamic side, Saudi Arabia took the initiative on inter-faith dialogue as a "great Sunni country" and the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." For example in June 2008, Saudi Arabian King Abdullah hosted an international conference gathering Muslim scholars aimed at inter-faith dialogue. The following month in Madrid, the king got the participation of the king of Spain, and an international conference on inter-faith dialogue came into reality. Then in 2011 in Vienna, Saudi Arabia, Spain and Austria founded the international organization named "King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue," with the Holy See attending as Founding Observer.

On the other hand, Jordan is also trying to take the initiative on inter-faith dialogue as this article will discuss. About 6% of Jordan's population is Christians; they are predominantly Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics [Ryan 2014: 284]. The coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Jordan has been on the whole doing well. Taking this success as a foundation, Jordan's inter-faith dialogue has a uniqueness which differs from every other Sunni country.

II. The Amman Message: Moderation in the Inter-Ummah Politics

2-1. Outline of the Amman Message

The Amman Message was declared on 9th November, 2004 at Amman's al-Hashimiyyin Mosque by Jordan's chief justice, Shaykh 'Izz al-Din al-Tamimi in front of King Abdullah II. The Message was composed by some Ulama, the leader of whom was Prince Ghazi. He is a cousin of the king and the chief adviser to the king for Religious and Cultural Affairs. He received a Ph.D. from al-Azhar University and has the qualification of *'alim*. This message

insists on the disavowal of radicalism and declares the moderate way of Islam by citation of the Quran. This message was summarized in “the 3 points of the Amman Message” in 2005.

The first point is to insist that it is neither possible nor permissible to declare as apostates any other group of Muslims who believe in God, and His Messenger, the pillars of faith, and the five pillars of Islam, and do not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of the religion. On the first point, the 8 jurisprudences, which include the four Sunni Madhahib (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali), the two Shi'i Madhahib (Ja'afari and Zaydi), the Ibadi and the Zahiri, all insist that such persons are Muslims. They also insist that whoever subscribes to the Ashari creed, 'real' Sufism and 'true' Salafism is also Muslim. The Message forbids takfir against all of the above.

The second point insists that every difference among all the jurisprudences is a minor problem and should be accepted. And the third point insists that a fatwa should be issued only by one who has the qualification of knowledge.

This “3 point Amman Message” was submitted by Jordanian King Abdullah II to the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference¹) conference and other conferences from 2005 to 2006, and the endorsements to this message amount to 552 from political leaders, religious leaders and Islamic thinkers from all over the Islamic world beyond the sects or jurisprudences.²

2-2. Legitimacy of Jordan's Inter-Sects Rapprochement

As we see in the Amman Message, Jordan, without sectarian conflicts inside the country, is aggressively transmitting the message aiming for Inter-sect rapprochement. In Jordan's Inter-sect rapprochement policy, there are some characteristics to its legitimacy.

The first characteristic, the emphasis of the noble lineage of the royal Hashemite family can be mentioned. This is the citation from the main text of the Amman Message; The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has embraced the path of promoting the true luminous image of Islam, halting the accusations against it and repelling the attacks upon it. This is in accordance with the inherited spiritual and historical responsibility carried by the Hashemite monarchy, honored as direct descendants of the Prophet (Al al-bayt) [...] who carried the message [MABDA 2009: 4]. What deserves special mention regarding this lineage is that the Jordanian Hashemite family belongs to the line of Hassan, the son of Ali [Sultān 2009: 562]. This means that the royal family compare favorably with Shiite noble lineages. This is one of the advantages or characteristics of Jordan's Inter-sect rapprochement policy compared to that of Saudi Arabia or of other countries.

1 It was renamed as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2011.

2 The list of all endorsement: <<http://ammanmessage.com/grand-list-of-endorsements-of-the-amman-message-and-its-three-points/>> (last accessed 12/1/2017)

Jordan also has legitimacy as the custodian of Jerusalem (Al-Quds). From when it occupied Jerusalem in 1948 during the first Arab-Israeli War to 1967, Jordan governed the West Bank of the Jordanian River. The first king of Jordan, Abdullah I administrated the West Bank and tried to make Jordan's legitimacy official in Jerusalem [Katz 2005: 54–75]. From the 1950s, Jordan started the restoration of Haram Sharif, especially of the Dome of the Rock. Jordan lost her sovereignty over the West Bank in 1967, but the restoration continued after that. For example in the 1980s and also in 1994 the previous king, Hussein, restored the Dome of Rock and its golden dome. In 1969, the Minbar of al-Aqsa Mosque, which was set on fire by a radical Zionist, was also restored by King Hussein and this restoration was taken over by the present king, Abdullah II. The Jordanian government acts as the custodian or guardian of Jerusalem, the third Holy Place of Islam. All this confirms Jordan's legitimacy to claim "true Islam" in its inter-sect rapprochement policy or Islamic Moderate thought.

2-3. Importance of Jordan's Political Strategy

Jordan is a small country surrounded by Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and Israel, therefore its stability depends on the stability of the region the whole. Such a moderate approach, like publishing the Amman Message and making a consensus in the Islamic World by it, is one step towards bringing about stability in the Middle East, even if the message can do nothing to ease the crises of civilization in the region.

The Amman Message defends the world Muslim community against Islamic Radicalism, Takfirism, and Sunni Salafi Jihadism. However the message is not only for defense but also for taking the initiative among the Sunni Conservative countries actively in the aspect of religious rapprochement. Jordan's legitimacy for inter-sect rapprochement is supported by its original characteristics as mentioned before. For example, Saudi Arabia, in which Wahhabism predominates, isn't concerned about its lineage, and acts as the custodian of the two Holy Cities, Makkah and Madina. On the other hand, Morocco has a royal family belonging to Ahl al-Bayt, and it also exhibits its influence on the problem of Jerusalem. Among those Sunni countries, Jordan makes use of the original legitimacy of its ideology in Sunni world and is actively taking the initiative on religious policy strategically.

Although this message is a political strategy of the Jordanian royal family, it has importance as a new trend of Sunni moderate thought in the 21st century. The next section shows the message's importance in Islamic thought.

2-4. Importance in Islamic Thought

The Amman Message can be put in the trend of the movement of so-called Tqrib or Taqarub in Arabic. Brunner [2004] defined this movement as "the aspiration toward ecumenical rapprochement of the denominations" and continued as follows:

It (Tqrib or Taqarub) was expressed for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century in the course of the general pan-Islamic tendencies that were in their formative stages at the time. Starting with these initially isolated events, inter confessional cooperation was first manifested in an organized form in the Islamic congress movement of the 1920s and 30s. Somewhat later, individual groupings specifically established for this purpose started to appear. Usually bearing programmatic names, their publications offered a forum for dialogue to Shiite and Sunnis alike. [Brunner 2004: 3]

As Brunner [2004] explains in detail, the Taqrib movement was mainly lead by the relationship between al-Azhar and Shiite clergy in the 20th century. What deserves attention about this movement is that Mahmud Shaltut, the Shaykh of al-Azhar in those days, issued a fatwa in 1959 as follows: The Ja‘fari school of thought, which is also known as al-Shia al-Imamiyya al-Ithna ‘Ashariyya [i.e., Twelvers], is a school of thought that is religiously correct to follow in worship as other schools of thought [Harverson 2013: 507]. Before Shaltut, no Sunni legal scholar of rank had gone as far to recognize Shiism as a completely equal denomination [Brunner 2004: 290]. Therefore this was a very historic fatwa in the realm of Sunni thought. As a further Taqrib movement, Ibadism was also incorporated into the category of Islam at the end of the 20th century.

The Amman Message presented at the beginning of the 21st century mentioned the 8 Islamic jurisprudences and recognized them all as true Islam. In this point, this message can be grasped as a development of Shaltut’s fatwa and the progress of the Taqrib movement. Moreover, the Amman Message does correspond to the needs of this 21st century’s situation, in this time of intensifying sectarian conflicts. The forbidding of takfir and fatwas without qualification is one of the edicts corresponding to the modern situation of the threats by leaders of Sunni Salafi Jihadism like al-Zarqawi against Sunni governments and Shiism.

Sunnis, officially Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a, stress the importance of Sunna, the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, silent permissions (or disapprovals) of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and Jama‘a, agreement of Ummah or agreed by the majority of the Ummah. The background to forbidding takfir in the Amman Message is that takfir itself is the cause of the splitting of the Ummah. This message tries to incorporate the Sunni minorities like the Ash‘arite school of theology, Sufism and also Salafism into Jama‘a, against Takfirism. Moreover, this message even includes Shiism in this Jama‘a and this means that it really shows the breadth of Jama‘a. This is the very originality of Jordan’s Sunni moderate thought.

III. A Common Word: Moderation in Inter-Religious Dialogues

3-1. Outline of “A Common Word” initiative

Jordan’s approach to the inter-religious dialogues is represented in “A Common Word Initiative.” The expression “A Common Word (Kalima Sawā’)” derives from the Quran (3: 64), “Say: O People of Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God.” [MABDA 2012: 21]

After the announcement of the Amman Message, in 2005 “the Amman Interfaith Message” was published and this became the basis of the Jordan’s inter-religious dialogue. In September 2006, the news that Pope Benedict XVI had spoken about the violence of Islam in a lecture in German was reported prominently and this provoked a big controversy. Regarding this, one month later, Prince Ghazi and 37 other major Muslim figures from around the world made an “open letter to the Pope,” which pointed out some mistakes in the lecture and called for interfaith dialogue and understanding. Finally, these attempts came to fruition in an open letter, the title of which is “A Common Word Between Us and You (Kalima Sawā’ Bayna-nā wa Bayna-kum),” which was written by Prince Ghazi and 138 other Ulama [Ghazi 2010: 3]. This article, named Jordan’s interfaith initiative, was represented by this open letter as “A Common Word Initiative.”

“A Common Word” mentions especially the relationship between Islam and Christianity. It emphasises the shared aspects of Islam and Christianity, such as ‘the love of God’ and ‘the love of neighbor,’ quoting the Quran and the Bible’s New Testament. “A Common Word” was uploaded to the Internet and got many signatures in its favor from distinguished people from various fields.³ This initiative is actively against the criticism that Islam is violent religion.

In response to this inter-religious rapprochement approach, in 2007, Yale Divinity School expressed its approval of it, by the statement “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word between Us and You” with more than 300 signatures by Christian bishops, priests or other Christians [Volf, Cumming and Yarrington 2010: 51].

3-2. Characteristics of Jordan’s Inter-faith Dialogue

There are some advantages in Jordan’s Inter-faith Dialogue. Jordan has a minority population of Christians as mentioned. Jordan is an Islamic country but Christians in Jordan have been enjoying freedom in their religious life. Jordan emphasizes the success of coexistence between Muslims and Christians inside of the country. In the “Amman Interfaith Message” submitted in 2005, there are descriptions like the following:

3 The list of signatories: <<http://www.acommonword.com/signatories/>> and <<http://www.acommonword.com/sigtype/newsig/>> (last accessed 12/1/2017)

H.M. King Abdullah II's [interfaith] message did not come out of a void. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has been blessed with one of the most harmonious religious experiences in the world. [...] Christians in Jordan hold a special place at all levels of Jordanian life and are fiercely patriotic. Historically speaking, there is no country in the world with more religious harmony, camaraderie and goodwill than Jordan at either the government or the popular level. In the Parliament Christians have 9 seats reserved for them out of a total of 110 seats (i.e. over 8%, compared with their real population of 2.5%); out of a cabinet of about 24 ministers, they always hold 1–3 ministries; they hold top posts in the Army, the Intelligence, the Judiciary, the Royal Court, the media, the educational institutes and at every level of government administration. They are amongst the largest landowners and generate close to 10% of the country's private sector economy. The Christians Churches enjoy their own official council and their own laws whereby they determine their own affairs. Moreover, Jordan officially protects and promotes their Holy Sites [MABDA 2005: 17–20].

The Jordanian government also protects sacred places of Christianity and ancient historical relics of Christianity inside of Jordan. In Madaba, a town located about 30 km south-west of Amman, we can find some of the archaeological relics of Christianity. The most famous one is “the Madaba Map,” which is a 6th-century mosaic map of Jerusalem, now inside of the church of Saint George. Another example is Al-Maghtas, the Baptism site, which is considered to be the original location of the baptism of Jesus, located some 50 km west of Amman beside the River Jordan. After the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1994, the restoration of the area was started under the initiative of Prince Ghazi and the archaeological excavations were sponsored by UNESCO. After these significant archeological discoveries were made, a UNESCO heritage site was made in 2015 on the eastern bank of the River Jordan.

At this Holy site, the construction of new churches (the Anglican, the Armenian, the Coptic and the Catholic churches and the Russian Pilgrims' House) is now on going and projects like this are operated by the Baptism Site Commission, an independent board of trustees appointed by King Abdullah II and Prince Ghazi chairs the commission.⁴ King Abdullah II and Prince Ghazi invited three Popes, Orthodox Patriarchs, and other visitors (Baptist, Armenian, Anglican, Coptic and Belgium) to al-Maghtas, staged to show authority as a guardian of Christianity.

Moreover, from the 1950s to the 1960s, under the reign of the previous king, Hussein, Jordan repaired the Holy Sepulture Church in Jerusalem, which was at that time had almost

⁴ From the official Web site of this commission “The Baptism Site of Jesus Christ” <<http://www.baptismsite.com/about-us/>> (last accessed 12/1/2017)

completely collapsed [Katz 2005: 102]. Added to Jordan's contribution to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, Jordan is upholding its role as the custodian of the Holy Islamic and also the Holy Christian sites of Jerusalem. This is one of the unique characteristics and advantages of Jordan, quite unlike Saudi Arabia.

Such activities support Jordan's Islamic legitimacy and also guarantee its inter-religious rapprochement policy represented its "A Common Word" initiative. Jordan's advantage in its religious rapprochement policy is that it represents both Islam and Christianity and shows its fairness. This is different from Saudi Arabia, whose religious rapprochement policy is to represent only Islam.

3-3. Importance of Jordan's inter-faith dialogue

Jordan's inter-faith dialogue, represented by "A Common Word," is to urge coexistence, dialogue or cooperation between Muslims and Christians. This is against Islamophobia and also so-called Islamic Radicalism. Interestingly, the "A Common Word" initiative is not only for defending Islam but also for insisting actively that Islam is a religion of love; love of God and love of neighbors, all over the world. In addition, both The Amman Message and A Common Word emphasize the common ground shared by sects and religions, and this is a very important trend of Islamic moderate thought in the Modern times.

This initiative is supported by the concrete practices of Jordan, such as coexisting with Christians or protecting the Holy Places or the heritages of Christianity. This is the uniqueness of Jordan's interfaith dialogue. Although other Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco are also trying to take the initiative on this moderate Islamic trend, Jordan has shown that it can demonstrate its ability in its own sphere. It means that, inside Sunni Conservatism, there are competitions among Sunni moderate ideologies which are strategically set forth by Sunni states.

Conclusion

In 21st century, Jordan has manifested its religious aspect in a moderate way. Under attack by Shi'ite Revolutionism, Salafi Jihadism and Islamophobia, in such a difficult situation, Jordan is trying to promote moderate Islam. This is Jordan's diplomatic strategy, but this is also in accord with the trend of reviving Sunni moderate thought. Especially because of the rise of Sunni Salafi Jihadism, Sunni Conservative countries such as Jordan have begun to show their own Sunni ideology. However, while Sunni Conservative countries show the same Sunni ideology, Jordan's Sunni ideology is supported by its Hashemite royal family, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and by their contribution as a custodian of Jerusalem. Not only the king, but all the members of the royal family from Ahl al-Bayt, show its Islamic legitimacy and constitute its religious moderate ideology.

In the aspects of Inter-faith dialogue, Jordan uses its advantages as the home of “the birth place of Christianity” and its Christian population. Its legitimacy is guaranteed by its policy of protecting the sacred places of Christianity, and Churches or ancient sites and treasures of Christianity inside Jordan and in Jerusalem. The Islam-Christianity Rapprochement policy stands against Jihadism, which harms Christians, and also against Islamophobia in all over the world. Jordan is a small country but represents both Islam and Christianity in its own context and takes the initiative in inter-faith dialogue and the trend of moderate Islam in an era of sectarian conflicts and the clash of religions based civilizations. Jordan’s aspiration to be a leader of moderate Islam is vitally connected with the very *raison d’etat* of the kingdom and its survival.

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